



CRISTINA BALMA-TIVOLA

The Fool Was Playing (and I Was Still Able to Dance)



CRISTINA BALMA-TIVOLA

The Fool Was Playing (and I Was Still Able to Dance)

There I was. Having just arrived by train to Venice, having a coffee and watching the university building outside the window.

The university where I taught for two years, where I was loved by my students and where I enjoyed myself. Where I had kind colleagues and was much appreciated.

Today I was going there for the last time, to let my students take their exams, and then I would leave teaching.

Doctors told me something severe was going on with my health, and to get ready for the worse.

And there I was: 38yo, anthropologist who hardly fought to get at least a job as an adjunct professor, now losing it, and her dreams. But, above all, I was simply sad, and scared. I walked out the café, and I reached my classroom.



When I finished, I exited the university building, and getting back to the station  
I realised something I completely forgot about:  
that day was Shrove Tuesday, and the carnival was booming in Venice streets.

I never saw it before and I had a train to get,  
but a thought came violent to my mind and visualised in front of my eyes.  
It said “you are tired, in pain, but you might not be able to attend it next year  
so make an effort, and enjoy it now, enjoy it while you can...”.

I let the train leave, and began walking.  
The fool was playing and leading the dance.  
Bunches of girls and boys were enjoying it, without thinking about the future.  
I was watching with consciousness and happiness at the same time.





Everybody was taking pictures, and nobody was caring about being immortalised by my camera, although I wasn't wearing any costumes.  
It was a matter of seeing or being seen, and everybody was taking part to it.

People were going around with precious costumes they prepared all year long for the event.  
There was definitely some collective, narcissistic attitudes – a true, visceral need to “being seen”.

It was time to overcome my shyness, and show myself  
– as everybody did, nobody would have cared about me.

I made my way to a make-up stall: a girl painted my face as a violet and gold butterfly,  
and braid part of my hair with gold glass beads and ribbons.  
I smiled: in a delicate way, my usual being somehow 'different' was restored.





My fear, however, was there, talking to me  
and showing itself through subtle coincidences:  
the evil face of a girl whose eyes you could hardly tell if were open or closed...



... two beautiful witches, with big, flourishing hats, openly laughing on the stairs, unaware of a man death announcement in the typical old fashion way - as a flier on the wall .

... and lastly a boy, whose visage was painted white and whose head was covered with a black hood, was standing nearby a bank advertisement:  
“Are you in 'apnoea'? Let your account 'breath”.



Death and fear were teasing me, and I was nervous and happy at the same time, determinate in persuading myself on keep on walking, in spite of the backache and the suffocating stomach pain.

I was keeping on looking the beauty of the people.  
For example, she was simply standing there, pretending she was waiting for someone – actually replying with enthusiasm when asked to pose for a picture.





On the contrary, my lovely whizzes were only thinking about themselves and the bright colours of their dresses, asking people around to shoot them photographs they would admire on their own.

Old and young fellows graciously met  
on the stairs out of a church,  
and shared huge smiles under the laws  
and practices of the ancient courtesy.



And then she came, the double of my beloved grandmother who died 5 years before,  
taking – Her Majesty! – the guise of Queen Elizabeth  
accompanied by her royal dog.

She was smiling at me,  
and I took the smile as reassurance that everything was going to be alright.





The biggest smiles eventually came from a group of young girls, simply exploiting the day to send once more – and never enough – a message of peace on their cheeks.

As the goodbye was from other girls who – honoured – posed for me in their pyjamas and slippers, ready to get to bed.



The day before I left my bed in the hospital to come here, as I had promised my students they were not going to be examined by someone who didn't know the discipline nor the program. And now, these girls were reminding me as well that the day after I was going back to a bed by myself, under therapies and diets, keeping my fingers crossed to get out of all that.

I got on the train with the gold and violet butterfly painted on my face, and I laughed out loud when – once in my town where carnival is not celebrated – walking back home from the station everybody was staring at me, and commenting I should be mad...

Yet, they actually didn't even bother me:  
I was only thinking that the fool was playing, and I was still able to dance.

*The Fool Was Playing (and I Was Still Able to Dance)*

Text & Images © Cristina Balma-Tivola, 2015



